NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Hendrick Avercamp
Dutch, 1585 - 1634

A Scene on the Ice

c. 1625

oil on panel
overall: 39.2 x 77 cm (15 7/16 x 30 5/16 in.)
framed: 64.8 x 102.2 x 5.7 cm (25 1/2 x 40 1/4 x 2 1/4 in.)
Inscription: lower left in ligature: HA
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1967.3.1

ENTRY

The smooth ice of a frozen river or canal was (and is) a source of great pleasure for the Dutch. The sense of freedom it provided created an almost holiday spirit for both young and old, rich and poor. For the upper class it was a time to enjoy the brisk winter air in beautifully crafted horse-drawn sleighs; for the young at heart it offered a chance to skate along holding hands with a loved one; for others it provided a chance to play *kolf*, to ice fish, or just to watch the array of humanity enjoying their shared experience. Frozen waterways also served as transportation arteries that enabled the movement of people and goods, so winter days spent on the frozen ice may not always have been as carefree as this description would imply; still, the pictorial and literary traditions from the seventeenth century certainly highlight the positive aspects.[1] Primary among those who created this idyllic image was Hendrick Avercamp. In numerous landscapes such as this one he recorded the experiences of his compatriots as they skated, sleighed, talked, or just quietly observed the open expanse of smooth ice on a Dutch waterway.

Avercamp, who lived in Kampen, far removed from the artistic centers of Haarlem and Amsterdam, worked his entire career in a style that derived from sixteenth-century prototypes, where landscape vistas were viewed from above to allow for a panoramic overview of the scene below. The specific type of winter scene favored by Avercamp follows a rich tradition that goes back to Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Flemish, c. 1525/1530 - 1569), such as his *Winter Landscape with Bird-Trap*, 1565 (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels), a composition whose popularity can be measured by the frequent copies made by Bruegel's son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (Flemish, c. 1564 - 1637/1638). Similar scenes appeared in

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prints and drawings by numerous artists, including Hans Bol (Netherlandish, 1534 - 1593) [fig. 1] and David Vinckboons (Dutch, 1576 - c. 1632). A number of ice scenes, including compositions by Bol and Vinckboons, were conceived as parts of series representing the seasons of the year.[2] Other depictions of skaters appear in emblematic prints, where the difficulty of staying upright was associated with the slipperiness of human life.[3]

While Avercamp never strayed very far from these traditions, he did develop this subject matter into a specialty with its own distinctive feel. His work differs from that of his predecessors primarily in the attention he pays to the individuality of the figures in his scenes and the prominence he gives them over the surrounding landscape elements. These characteristics are particularly evident in *A Scene on the Ice*, in which landscape elements are rendered schematically while differences in the social classes and even the individuality of the figures are emphasized by their activities, costumes, and attitudes. Little vignettes can be identified: the solidly middle-class burghers that stand to watch more elegant members of the upper class glide by in their horse-drawn sleigh; the two friends who skate in tandem; the working-class family that unloads barrels from a transport sledge; or the couple in the far distance whom others help to their feet. Avercamp does not appear to have been interested in using his winter scene as a means for expressing abstract concepts, such as those associated with seasons of the year or emblematic images. On the contrary, he delighted in capturing the variety of social interactions that occur when whole communities share the pleasures of the ice.

Avercamp, as is characteristic of Dutch seventeenth-century painters, did not paint such scenes from life; rather, he composed them in his studio on the basis of drawings. One such drawing depicts the standing couple to the right of the sleigh [fig. 2]. Other drawings of individual figures and figure groups also exist. A consequence of this method of working is that the same figures continually recur in Avercamp's paintings. Sometimes he places them in relatively the same position, but often they appear in new arrangements among a different cast of characters. In a finished watercolor from Berlin [fig. 3], a number of figures similar to those in *A Scene on the Ice* can be found, including the figure in the horse-drawn sleigh, the man leaning over to tie his skate, and, in reverse, the young couple skating hand in hand.[4] A painting that has close compositional relationships to *A Scene on the Ice* is one of Avercamp's masterpieces, his *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [fig. 4]. Here, not only are the landscape elements identical, but there are no fewer than fourteen figure groups that equate to those in

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the Washington painting. Certain of these are in comparable locations, while others are repositioned, as in the vignette of the father pushing his wife and their pointing child in a sled, which appears on the right edge of the Washington painting and the left center of the LACMA painting.[5]

The close relationship of the Washington and LACMA paintings, and the clear superiority of the latter, has raised the question as to whether Avercamp actually executed *A Scene on the Ice*.[6] The question here, however, is less one of attribution than of the possible impact of market forces and the degree of preservation. The LACMA painting is so finely conceived that it seems probable that it was commissioned directly from the artist. The Gallery's painting was most likely painted for the open market; in any event, it was not given the care and attention allotted to *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*. Moreover, the appearance of the Gallery's painting today is hardly what it was during the seventeenth century. The paint surface has been abraded [see abrasion] through old restorations with the result that many of the smaller figures in the middle ground and background have lost their precise forms. Some figures have been so badly damaged that they have been almost completely repainted. Occasionally, peculiar mistakes of interpretation have occurred in the repainting. One, for example, is the pole with a fish hanging at its tip that can be seen stuck in the ice in the middle of the composition. This pole should actually be held by the boy skating hand in hand with the girl, just as in the LACMA painting. Another error in an earlier restorer's interpretation occurs with the man tying his skate onto his left foot in the lower left. The small bird that so intently watches him is the restorer's creation. Based on the LACMA painting, the "bird" would originally have been the man's right skate.[7]

The differences in the character of the LACMA painting and the Washington painting may also be ones of chronology, although the chronology of Avercamp's work is extremely difficult to discern, for he dated his paintings infrequently and may well have worked in various styles simultaneously. Stylistic evidence seems to indicate that the LACMA painting dates from about 1615 to 1620.[8] It may be assumed that the Gallery's painting was executed shortly thereafter since logic dictates that *A Scene on the Ice* must be a somewhat simplified variant. Not only is the landscape more schematically rendered, but the various figure groups are not as coherently integrated. A date for the Washington painting in the early 1620s is not contradicted by dendrochronological dating, which indicates a felling date for the oak panel in the range of 1606 to 1616.[9] A date in the 1620s also makes sense stylistically, for in those years Avercamp favored compositions with relatively small

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figures and with a loosely structured pictorial organization.[10]

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Hans Bol, *Winter Landscape with Skaters*, c. 1584/1586, pen and brown ink and wash on laid paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, 1991.15.1

fig. 2 Hendrick Avercamp, *Standing Couple*, c. 1615, pen and ink and wash, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, RP-T-1952-344. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

fig. 3 Hendrick Avercamp, *Scene on Ice*, c. 1620, watercolor, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, KdZ2230. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY

fig. 4 Hendrick Avercamp, *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*, c. 1620, oil on panel, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mrs. Edward W. Carter Collection. Digital Image © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY

NOTES

[1] See Jan Six van Chandelier, *'s Amsterdammers Winter*, ed. Maria A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen (Utrecht, 1988).

[2] See, in particular, Hessel Gerritsz's engraving after Vinckboons, *Heyms*., illustrated in Albert Blankert et al., *Hendrick Avercamp, 1585–1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612–1679: Frozen Silence—Paintings from Museums and Private Collections* (Amsterdam, 1982), 150–151, cat. 33.

[3] A print by Johannes Galle after Pieter Bruegel the Elder of an ice scene, dated 1553, is entitled "De slibberachtigheyt van's menschen leven." For a discussion of emblematic literature of ice scenes, see Evert van Straaten, *Koud tot op het Bot* (The Hague, 1977), 43–48. See also the colored

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drawings of ice scenes by Adriaen van de Venne in Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Adriaen van de Venne's Album* (London, 1988), 326, 336–342.

[4] For other paintings in which figure groups found in the Washington painting occur, see Clara J. Welcker, *Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634), bijgenaamd "De Stome van Campen" en Barent Avercamp (1612–1679), "Schilders tot Campen"* (Zwolle, 1933; rev. ed. by D. J. Hensbroek-van der Poel, Doornspijk, 1979), pls. 22 and 25.

[5] The relationship between these two paintings was thoughtfully analyzed in 1986 by Kathleen Pedersen in a graduate seminar paper at the University of Maryland (in NGA curatorial files).

[6] George S. Keyes "Hendrick Avercamp and the Winter Landscape," in Albert Blankert et al., *Hendrick Avercamp, 1585–1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612–1679: Frozen Silence—Paintings from Museums and Private Collections* (Amsterdam, 1982), 55 n. 25.

[7] I owe these observations to Kathleen Knutsen from her graduate seminar paper at the University of Maryland (in NGA curatorial files). The extended bottom edge of the pole (with fish attached), now worn away, can be faintly observed in the X-radiography and in the surface of the paint itself when examined with a binocular microscope. The skate/shoe, turned into a bird, is apparent as overpaint when it is examined with a binocular microscope.

[8] For an excellent analysis of the LACMA painting, see John Walsh Jr. and Cynthia P. Schneider, *A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter* (New York, 1981), 3–7.

[9] The dendochronology was conducted by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, February 12, 1987 (letter in NGA curatorial files).

[10] See Albert Blankert et al., *Hendrick Avercamp, 1585–1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612–1679: Frozen Silence—Paintings from Museums and Private Collections* (Amsterdam, 1982), 28.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a single oak panel with a horizontal grain, has been thinned and a cradle attached. Dendrochronology shows the panel to be from a tree felled between 1606 and 1616.[1] Triangular wood inserts replace the bottom right and left corners. The wood grain is quite prominent, due to increased transparency of the aged oil paint and moderate abrasion overall. A thin, smooth, white ground layer is followed by a coarse, granular, gray imprimatura. The horizontal, striated strokes of the imprimatura application, visible through the thin sky, are incorporated into the

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design of the foreground figures.

Paint was applied in thin, smooth transparent layers with more opaque paint used in the details and white highlights. Very fine contours were applied around the figures with liquid black paint. While discrete losses are few, the paint surface has been heavily abraded, most notably in the sky near the right and along all four edges. Some figures in the middle ground were almost totally reconstructed when the painting was restored in the early twentieth century. The horse and most foreground figures have also been reinforced, sometimes quite inaccurately (see text). No conservation treatment has been carried out at the National Gallery.

[1] Dendrochronology by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, February 12, 1987 (letter in NGA curatorial files).

PROVENANCE

Said to have been at the Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg.[1] (D. Katz, Dieren), by 1933; J.M.B. Beuker, Heelsum, by 1934;[2] by inheritance to his widow, Mrs. J.C. Beuker [née De Kruyff van Dorssen]; sold 5 April 1967 through (A. Martin de Wild, The Hague) to NGA.

[1] In the catalogues for the 1934 and 1938 exhibitions in which it was included, the painting was described as having been previously in the collection of the Hermitage. However, the picture is not listed in any of that museum's collection catalogues.

[2] Labels from the 1933 and 1934 exhibitions both say that Katz was the “exhibitor,” but they give two different names as the “owner” (removed from the back of the painting, now in NGA curatorial files). The owner’s name on the 1933 label is difficult to decipher, but appears to be two initials followed by “te H.” The owner’s name on the 1934 label clearly reads “J.M.B. Beuker Heelsum.”

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1933 Kunsttentoonstelling van 17e Eeuwsche Schilderijen, Gemeentelijk Museum, Zutphen, The Netherlands, 1933, no. 45.

1934 Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen van Oud-hollandsche Meesters uit de Collectie Katz te Dieren, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 1934, no. 45.

1938 Meesterwerken uit Vier Eeuwen 1400-1800, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1938, no. 52.

1969 In Memoriam, Ailsa Mellon Bruce, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, unnumbered checklist.

1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, 1997, unnumbered brochure.

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1934 Niehaus, Kasper. "Oudhollandsche meesters in het Frans Halsmuseum." *De Telegraaf*, 29 (November 1934): 7.

1934 W., J. "Een Collectie der Firma D. Katz te Haarlem." *Nieuwe Arnhemsche Courant* (22 November 1934).

1938 Hannema, Dirk. *Meesterwerken uit vier eeuwen, 1400-1800*. Exh. cat. Museum Boymans, Rotterdam, 1938: no. 52.

1968 *European Paintings and Sculpture, Illustrations*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1968: 2, no. 2315, repro.

1975 *European Paintings: An Illustrated Summary Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1975: 14, repro.

1978 King, Marian. *Adventures in Art: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.* New York, 1978: 54, 56-57, pl. 32.

1979 Welcker, Clara J. *Hendrick Avercamp (1585-1634), bijgenaamd "De Stomme van Campen" en Barent Avercamp (1612-1679), "Schilders tot Campen"*. Edited by D.J. Hensbroek-van der Poel. Rev. ed. Doornspijk, 1979: 216, no. S73.3.

1982 Blankert, Albert. *Hendrick Avercamp, 1584-1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612-1679; Frozen Silence: Paintings from Museums and Private Collections*. Exh. cat. Waterman Gallery, Amstersdam; Provenciaal Overijssels Museum, Zwolle. Amsterdam, 1982: 55 n. 25.

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1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 287, no. 372, color repro.

1985 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. Washington, 1985: 33, repro.

1986 Sutton, Peter C. *A Guide to Dutch Art in America*. Washington and Grand Rapids, 1986: 305, repro.

1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 9-14, color repro. 11.

2001 Spolsky, Ellen. *Satisfying Skepticism: Embodied Knowledge in the Early Modern World*. Burlington, 2001: 146-147, fig. 7.3.

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